

**“BUILDING BRIDGES OF FRIENDSHIP WITH PEOPLE
OF OTHER FAITHS”**

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Dear Sisters and Confreres,

I am pleased to be here today in order to share with you, based on my work and my experiences, some insights and considerations, on the proposed topic “Building bridges of Friendship with People of other Faiths”. I am sure that our beloved Founder, Saint Arnold Janssen, is happy to see us from Heaven, as we are doing something good in order to enhance the quality of our mission activity he has entrusted to us: *Missio Dei, Missio ad gentes; passing over*, going beyond the border in order to meet and work with people from different cultures and faiths. Thank you Madre Leader, *Sr. Maria Theresia, Sister Monika*, and all Sisters for the invitation and for having chosen this topic.

As all of you know, I am working at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). It is one of the Holy See’s Offices, established initially by Pope Paul VI in 1964, during the Second Vatican Council, with the name “Secretariat for Non-Christians”, renamed as *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* in 1988 by Pope John Paul II.

The Office is entrusted especially, based on the Second Vatican Council’s Document “*Nostra Aetate*” (in our time), with the task to promote peace and harmony among people of different world religions through **dialogue** and **collaboration**.

We promote interreligious dialogue as we are firmly convinced that:

first, the believers have much in common; and the commonalities unite, foster and enhance the humanity, rather than separate or divide it. Then Document *Nostra Aetate* states that, indeed, the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in the religions. In fact, the religions differ in many aspects, nonetheless they often reflect a ray of the Truth which enlightens all men (cfr. NA, 2).

secondly, true peace can only be achieved through dialogue and negotiations, not through violence.

Thirdly, there will be no world peace without peace among the followers of different religions, as more than 80% of the world's populations are believers.

Regarding Christian-Muslim relations, another reasonable statement was always mentioned: There will be no peace in the world without peace among Christians and Muslims. Why? Christians and Muslims constitute more than the half of the world's population (Christians: 32.5 % corresponds to 2.2 Billion, Muslims: 21.5% corresponds to 1.5 Billion – which means Christians and Muslims altogether constitute 54%, corresponds to **3.7 billion people**, out of 7 billion world's population.

(FYI: Other religions: Hindus: 900,000,000, Chinese folk religionists: 400,000,000, Indigenous religionists: 400,000,000, Buddhists: 375,000,000, Sikhs: 24,000,000, Jews: 14,500,000, Baha'is: 7,400,000, Jains: 4,300,000, Shintoists: 4,000,000, Taoists: 2,700,000, No religion: 1,100,000,000. Source: Archives).

Fourthly, interfaith dialogue and proclamation are component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church. They are both oriented towards the communication of salvific truth (D&P 2). Therefore, as stated by Pope John Paul II in the Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, interfaith dialogue, promoted in faith and love is **a path toward the kingdom of God** (RM 57, 1990).

Interreligious Dialogue, what is it?

“There is no interfaith friendship without any kind of involvements in interreligious dialogue”. With other words: Dialogue and friendship; one presumes the other. We will see the interdependency of both later on.

What is interreligious dialogue all about? According to the Catholic Church, interreligious/interfaith dialogue is:

- the **encounter** of the followers of religions in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, **to promote, to build, to develop and to foster good relations and sincere friendship.**

- It is the attempt to **listen** to the other and to understand his/her religion in a respectful climate, hoping to find opportunities for a constructive collaboration.
- Dialogue is supported by the **hope** that the partner will share the same fundamental values of dialogue.
- Dialogue is not a one-way street, but a **reciprocal communication** (an exchange) on the basis of the three principal elements: **openness, listening and active participation**.
- And the **final goal** of dialogue is: mutual respect and mutual understanding among the followers of various religions leading to a peaceful and harmonious co-existence where people are able to enrich each other, based on the richness of their respective religious values.

An interfaith friendship, therefore, is an integral part of interfaith dialogue, as an interfaith friendship could be born from *dialogue of life, dialogue of collaboration, dialogue of spirituality, or theological dialogue*. **From dialogue and in dialogue a friendship could be established and developed, and in friendship dialogue can be continued.**

Interreligious Friendship

The Catholic Church, through the Second Vatican Council has recognized a greater plurality of the future development of the world and issued on 28 October 1965 the Document *Nostra aetate*, one of the 16 Official Second Vatican Council's Documents, by stating in the first paragraph: "*In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship*".

More than 50 years ago, the Council's Fathers have emphasized the correct attitude of the Catholic Church towards the plurality we are facing today and perhaps much more in the future. After more than 50 years, the Document *Nostra aetate* has not lost anything of its significance and importance. In contrast, our world today needs more dialogue and

friendship than it has ever been (cfr. Film “The Leaven of Godd” - 50 years Nostra aetate of October 2015).

Pope Francis, in his first meeting with different religious leaders one day after his inauguration as Pope, it was 20 March 2013, said: “The Catholic Church is aware of the importance of the promotion of **friendship and respect** between men and women of different religious traditions. I want to repeat this: the promotion of friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions. [The Church] is also aware of the responsibility that we all bear to this our world, to all of creation, which we should love and protect. And we can do much for the good of the poorest, of the weak and suffering, to promote justice and reconciliation, to build peace” (*The first meeting of Pope Francis with the religious leaders one day after his inauguration as Pope, 20 March 2013*).

Friendship – Interreligious Friendship – what is all about?

Friendship which is one of the central human experiences, at the same time is something sacred in the world religions. In different meetings and conferences, various religious leaders mentioned the promotion of dialogue mostly in relation to friendship.

The friendships that interest us in our discourse today are relationships that one could not establish with hundreds or thousands of people such as on social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or Twitter, and so on.

It is about **interreligious or interfaith friendships**. It is a very particular friendship due to various **particularities and sensitivities** in the religions. This kind of friendship requires also the *commitment of time* and *regular communication*, perhaps more than in a normal friendship. It will *not be restricted to a certain facet of life*, e.g., ‘office friends’, school friends, or sport friends, and so on.

For us Christians, based on our faith, a difference, even a deep difference, is not necessarily an obstacle to friendship. We refer ourselves to **Abraham**, a human being, is called a “friend of God” (James 2:23); and **Jesus**, God incarnate, calls not only loyal disciples (John 15:15) but also his betrayer (Matt 26:50) “friend”. In John 15,15 Jesus says to His disciples: “I shall no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know the master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father”. Above all, ***Love of God and love of neighbors***.

The roots of the English word ‘friend’ come from the Proto-Germanic *frijôjan*, related also to an Old English word “fréond” which means ‘to love’, thus, marked by *affection*. Friendship, interfaith friendship is something which involves **love and affection**.

How about the understanding of friendship in other world religions?

Friendship in Buddhism

Friendship in Buddhism is something sacred, as Buddha himself has spoken about it (more than 500 years before Christ), and documented the Pali Canon, in what is known as the Digha Nikaya or Collection of Long Discourses, and the text itself is known as the *Sigalovada Sutta*.

From the Buddhist point of view, friendship is extremely important. It has, according to Buddhist tradition, a direct connection with spiritual life. In the *Sigalovada Sutta* story Buddha said: friends and companions are the lords, and they are to be served and looked after in five ways or five duties;

First, through generosity, giving and sharing.

Secondly, speaking to friends kindly and compassionately.

Thirdly, looking after the welfare of friends, especially their spiritual welfare.

Fourthly, treating friends in the same way as one treats his/her ownself.

Fifthly, keeping word or keeping promise to friends.

All these duties have a reciprocal character, as Buddha says: all human relationships are reciprocal. Also friendship is based upon love with emphasis on equality what the Buddhists call *Pali Metta* or *Maitri* or *Mitra* in Sanskrit which means equality, none is more important than the other; also in broader sense it means positive feelings and happiness.

But the Buddhists put more emphasis on the spiritual friendship (*Metta Mode*) which help all who are involved in the friendship to become more unselfish and more egoless.

Friendship in Hinduism

In the 12th of 18 books of the Epic Mahabharata, the Hindus find the teachings about friendship. It is written, with whom the Hindus may build friendships. It is a very long list of people with different qualities, just to mention some:

“They that are possessed of eloquence and politeness of speech, they that possess knowledge, science and various information, they that are free from covetousness, they that are good to their friends, they that are grateful, they that are firm in truth, they that are devoted to athletic and other exercises, they that are of good families, they who never point out wrong paths to friends, they who are trustworthy, they who are devoted to the practice of righteousness... Persons of wicked behaviour should be avoided by all.

Friendship in Islam

Just to mention two sources the Muslims always use to promote dialogue and friendship:

- Surah al-Hujuraat (the Rooms), 49,13 says: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may **know** one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted”.

“Know”: ‘arafa (‘a-r-f) means: to know, to understanding and to learn. According to Islam, it is the plurality is the will of Allah, so that we dialogue and make friendships in order **to know each other, to understand each other and to learn from each other.**

- Surah al-Ma’ida (The Table spread) 5,82 says: “You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers [to be] the Jews and those who associate others with Allah; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, "We are Christians." That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant”.

Difficulties and Challenges of interreligious Friendship

In 10 years of service in the field of interreligious dialogue with many possibilities to meet people of different religions, I can describe with a few word, that Interreligious friendship is something wonderful, but is something which makes me **near to them and far from them at the same time.** This is due to various fundamental differences based on faith which have formed one’s attitude, one’s mentality, one’s characters, one’s way of thinking and way of life, leading to a kind of natural exclusivity. The most difficult one I face is the friendship with Muslims.

What are the challenges of interreligious friendship?

1. Insufficient grounding in one's own faith or lack of a solid convince of one's own religious identity (Reasons: Secularism, materialism, relativism, indifferentism, syncretism...)
2. Insufficient knowledge and understanding of the belief and practices of other religions, leading to a lack of appreciation for their significance.
3. Socio-political factors or some burdens of the past (Majority-minority, colonialism, crusades etc...)
4. Wrong understanding of the meaning of terms such as conversion, baptism, mission, dialogue, etc...
5. Self-Sufficiency, lack of openness leading to defensive or aggressive attitude.
6. Suspicion about other's motives in friendship

What can we benefit from the interreligious friendship?

Conversion which means changing one's religion is not the aim of interfaith friendships. But:

- (1) It can give us a **better understanding** of other faiths. And the better understanding can help us **avoid prejudices** (*pray for each other, best wishes*).
- (2) Interfaith friendships can lead us to a clearer and enriched understanding of **our own faith**.
- (3) Interfaith friendships can develop our ability to **articulate our faith in an authentic** way towards others.
- (4). In difficult times, friends are the ones who will be the first comforters, first defenders, first advocates and first protectors.

Thus, in a nutshell, interreligious friendship is considered as a means for gaining better understanding of self and other which could lead to collaborations for the common good.

And what could we learn from others through friendship?

Just to mention some:

- **Buddhists** give us witness to detachment from material goods and of respect for life (just in accordance with our vow of poverty);
- **Hindus** urge us towards meditation and contemplation;
- **Muslims** could help us better understand the importance of prayer, fasting and alms in everyday life; respect for religious laws and norms, the pride of being a believer...
- **The Disciples of Confucius** encourage us to respect elders and ancestors and to exercise filial piety (means general obedience);
- **Taoists** inspire us in the search for simplicity and humility;

Basic Principles /Golden Rules in the Interreligious Friendship:

Nostra aetate states: Dialogue and collaboration should be promoted in **Prudence and Love** (in veritate et caritate), NA, Art. 2.

During the conference from last October 2016 at the main Office of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) in Geneva, in order to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Catholic church's Document "Nostra Aetate", we were asked to reflect on the two key-words: "**Prudence and Love**" in interreligious dialogue and friendship.

I can summarize as follows:

PRUDENCE

1. Prudence refers to the cognitive aspect of dialogue and friendship. This means that a genuine and sincere interfaith dialogue and friendship require "good formation and adequate information" about one's religion and the religion of others. This helps to differ in order to understand correctly, and to find the commonalities between one's religion and the religion of others; as is said: Commonalities unite rather than separate.

2. Prudence refers to the full acknowledgement and full recognition of one's own religious identity. One cannot dialogue with people of other religions and make friendship with them in ambiguity. The ambiguity leads to relativism, indifferentism and syncretism, which are, in fact, not the very aim of interfaith dialogue.

3. And finally, Prudence refers also to the ability to place one's self correctly with regard to religious sensitivities of others.

LOVE

1. Love, the golden rule and core teaching of the Christians means encountering others as human beings, as they are; people with strength and weakness, each one with his or her particular social and historical background.
2. It is to treat dialogue partners as our friends as those who need to be heard, respected, understood and recognized equally. Dialogue partners and friends from other religions are men and women who need to be encountered without prejudices, generalization, stereotype thinking and any-phobia.
3. Love also means taking the needs, worries and anxieties of friends seriously into consideration, and try to offer possible solutions; without imposing.
4. And finally, “dialogue in friendship through love” tries to inspire others with the unconditioned love of Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6) by promoting forgiveness and reconciliation which are the basic conditions for true peace and harmony.

Conclusion

In our future mission activities, we will not be able to avoid the plurality of religions. As it was said “we are condemned to dialogue”, in an analogical way we can say, we are condemned to make friendship with people of other religions. Friendship is a necessity; not an option. An interreligious friendship is always possible. It requests the following basic human qualities: openness (open-mindedness), listening, sincerity, patience and communicativeness.

An interreligious friendship, due to its particularity, has to be cultivated permanently. This kind of friendship will also be repeatedly challenged, e.g. due to misunderstandings, lack of time, or socio-political circumstances. It will need much courage to restart the broken relationship, but one has to take this initiative without waiting for others.

In the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (Encyclical Letter of JP II on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate) Pope John Paul II wrote: "I am well aware that many missionaries and Christian communities find in the difficult and often

misunderstood path of dialogue their only way of bearing sincere witness to Christ and offering generous service to others. I wish to encourage them to persevere with faith and love, even in places where their efforts are not well received. Dialogue is a path toward the kingdom (of God) and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and seasons are known only to the Father (cf. Acts 1:7). "(RM 57, 1990).

If the Church is firmly convinced that Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus and Interreligious Dialogue are component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church because they are both oriented towards the communication of salvific truth, we can also say in an analogical way that making friendships with people of other faiths as an integral part of interfaith dialogue is the right way of the evangelizing mission of the Church where we have the possibility to make Christ known and to give testimony of His love.

In order that our dialogue and friendships could bear fruit, Saint Paul shows us Christians some advices: “Put on then... compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3:12-13).

Last but not least, we should also not forget that Peace is a gift from God. Through His Spirit, He makes us able to be true instruments of his peace. Apostle Paul also says: Peace is a gift of God because it is the fruit of His reconciliation with us. Only if we allow ourselves to be reconciled with God can we become artisans of peace.

Interreligious friendships

VIDEO – TESTIMONIES FROM VARIOUS RELIGIOUS LEADERS.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyrUy6cscMA>

Thank you.